

Rep. Baird: Current Medicare Crisis Exemplifies Effect of Stifled Congressional Debate (January 25, 2006)

Washington, D.C. - In the midst of the current Medicare fiasco, Congressman Brian Baird today renewed his call that lawmakers be given enough time to read and debate legislation. In 2003, frustrated by the inability of any of his colleagues to explain key provisions of the Medicare bill, Congressman Baird warned lawmakers that the plan would deprive people who desperately need pharmaceutical care [SEE 2003 TRANSCRIPT BELOW].

Members of Congress had mere hours to pour through the complex Medicare bill before casting votes that would have life or death consequences for many seniors. Years later, we are seeing the effects of that disastrous vote -- hundreds of thousands of Medicare beneficiaries have had difficulty obtaining their drugs, and many have been overcharged or flat out turned away, said Congressman Baird. The overly complicated and confusing Medicare plan, written to meet the needs of drug companies and private insurers, has failed beneficiaries. And Congress has failed beneficiaries because this could have been prevented.

Congressman Baird has repeatedly fought to change House rules and give lawmakers enough time to read legislation. The rules of the House of Representatives require Members be given three days to review legislation before they vote on it, however this review period is routinely overturned by a simple majority vote. Last month, Congressman Baird railed against the Majority for bringing up Defense Appropriations and Budget Reconciliation bills totaling more than a half trillion dollars in combined spending impact in the dead of the night, giving Members mere hours to pore through hundreds of pages of major policy and spending decisions before voting.

Beneficiaries began enrolling in the new Medicare drug programs on November 15, 2005. Most Medicare beneficiaries must sign up for a drug plan by May 15, 2006 to avoid penalties. Last month, Congressman Baird signed on to HR 3861 and called for an extension of the Medicare drug program enrollment period.

November 21, 2003: Debate on Medicare

Prescription Drug, Improvement, and Modernization ACT OF 2003

Underlining added for emphasis

Mr. BAIRD. Mr. Speaker, at the beginning of this debate, the distinguished chairman of the Committee on Rules pointed out that this is one of the most important bills we have faced possibly in our careers. Indeed, he is correct. Yet, we are given less than 24 hours to consider this. The most important bill in our careers, 24 hours to consider it.

It is part of a very troubling pattern, and I call my colleagues' attention to this: in the last 7 legislative days in this Congress, we have either authorized or appropriated more than \$1.26 trillion of the people's money. The defense authorization bill we were given 3 hours to read before the vote. The Medicare bill, we may have a total of about 28 hours, clock hours, if we read around the clock to read this. The intelligence authorization bill, 8 hours. A total of \$1.26 trillion, and we are going to have an omnibus appropriation bill shortly.

I would like to yield, if I may, to the gentlewoman from Ohio. I have asked one of the pages to take her a piece of text from this legislation, and I would like her to explain this to me. If we have had adequate time to study it, then we should know what is in it.

The text reads as follows, and I will invite the gentlewoman to explain what it means.

On page 13, actually of the interpretive paper from the Republican party, it reads, ``Plans would be permitted to substitute cost-sharing requirements for costs up to the initial coverage limit that were actuarially consistent with an average expected 25 percent coinsurance for costs up to the initial coverage limit. They could also apply tiered copayment, provided such copayments were actuarially consistent with the average 25 percent cost-sharing requirement."

I yield to the gentlewoman from Ohio (Ms. Pryce) to explain what that means.

Ms. PRYCE of Ohio. Mr. Speaker, I thank the gentleman from Washington (Mr. Baird) for yielding. This was just put in front of me. I would defer to the chairman of the Committee on Ways and Means or a member of the Committee on Ways and Means because this is their jurisdiction and certainly not the jurisdiction of the Committee on Rules.

Mr. BAIRD. Mr. Speaker, reclaiming my time. I believe the gentlewoman from Ohio (Ms. Pryce) has pointed out we have had adequate time to study the legislation. I presume she is going to vote on it. This is a summary provided by her Republican party, yet she fails to be able to explain it.

I would invite anyone here present with us today from the majority party, or who plans to vote from the minority party, to please explain what it is we are voting on. I would invite the next person to offer that explanation.

Ms. PRYCE of Ohio. Mr. Speaker, I will continue to reserve my time. We do not have any more speakers at this point.

Mr. BAIRD. Mr. Speaker, I thank the gentlewoman for yielding me the time.

I cannot get up and say this bill is awful entirely. I think there are some very good parts, and I think some good efforts have been put into it, but I have two concerns.

First of all, side effects. I think the side effects of this bill may well be fatal to some, and more importantly, I believe that most Members on both sides of the aisle have not really read this bill and do not fully understand it.

Earlier tonight, I invited the gentlewoman from Ohio to explain a simple passage.

Ms. PRYCE of Ohio. Mr. Speaker, will the gentleman yield?

Mr. BAIRD. I yield to the gentlewoman from Ohio.

Ms. PRYCE of Ohio. Mr. Speaker, I appreciate that. Earlier today, and once again now, a statement was placed in front of me, a statement which was a long, drawn out document, and he was asking me to explain it, and it is very unfortunate that we were not provided with that in advance.

Mr. BAIRD. Reclaiming my time, the point I am making is I do not think the gentlewoman has actually read the bill sufficiently to explain it.

I spent 23 years of my life in health care. I hold a doctorate in clinical psychology. I have spent hours on this bill. My eyes are exhausted. I must say I do not know fully well enough what is in it.

My colleagues have said to us, and I agree, this is one of the most important bills that we will face in our career, and yet my colleagues have given us less than 24 hours to look at it.

The great philosopher Socrates said this when the politicians of Athens imprisoned him, he said to his the young people he taught, he said, These people have imprisoned me for pointing out to them how little they know. Instead of being angry at me for pointing that out, they should be angry at themselves for knowing so little.

His advantage was he admitted that he did not know. What I would ask the gentlewoman is a simple request that we almost never do here. Let us break with precedent. Let us say, you know what, this is important, we are moving too fast. I look around this room and I will say to my distinguished colleagues I bet you, you have not read the bill carefully, and you really, fully cannot explain it to your constituents, and if you have not and if this bill spends \$400 billion of the taxpayers'

money and is going to blow a hole in the lid of this deficit and is going to deprive people who desperately need pharmaceutical care, then why do we not just take a little bit of time and read it? Who knows, I might actually like it well enough to vote for it, but I cannot vote for something you have not given us enough time to read.

That is what the people expect of us when they send us here. That is what a republic is all about it, but we do it a great disservice in this institution of late.

Ms. PRYCE of Ohio. Mr. Speaker, may I inquire as to the time remaining and how many speakers the gentlewoman from New York has?

###